

Hip-Hop at the Museum?

The Smithsonian Institution Opens a New Exhibit with a New Beat

History museums have always looked at the past, but the past isn't always ancient history. Did you know that museums also look at the history being made by young people like you today? The Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of American History recently gathered a broad collection on hip-hop culture for a new exhibit called "Hip-Hop Won't Stop: The Beat, The Rhymes, The Life."



What is Hip-Hop Culture? Hip-hop culture grew out of block parties in New York City, where groups of young people gathered to dance and rap. Today, **hip-hop music** is made of two parts: rapping (MCing) and DJing (production and scratching). **Hip-hop dance** is a freestyle dance that grew from break dancing. **Hip-hop art** is urban-inspired art, like graffiti. Hip-hop culture also includes fashion and street slang.

From the Streets of N.Y. to the World

Important artist movements have always sprung from diverse sources. Hip-hop is a musical art form created by urban black and Latino youth in New York City in the 1970s. Brent D. Glass, director of the National Museum of American History, believes that hip-hop—the music, dance,

and art—is now an important part of American culture. The Museum's project traces hip-hop from its beginnings in the 1970s, to its role in America and throughout the world today. Thirty years after it emerged from the inner-city neighborhoods in N.Y., hip-hop has evolved into a fast-moving cultural movement that has spread around the globe.

By collecting memorabilia from artists and producers in the hip-hop community, the museum has created a collection of hip-hop artifacts, from old school rap albums to street fashion. The hip-hop exhibit documents the history and reach of hip-hop, one of the most influential cultural explosions in recent history. "The National Museum of American History is committed to telling the story

of the American experience, and with the significant contributions from the hip-hop community, we will be able to place hip-hop in the continuum of American history,” he added.

Celebrating Diversity and Creativity

Rap, rhythmically spoken verse over a beat, has roots in rhythm & blues and funk, as well as African, Jamaican, and Latin music. Artists sample music that already exists but assemble it in new ways that haven’t been thought of before.

Artists throughout history have looked for ways to comment on society. Rappers, break dancers, and graffiti artists are doing just that. According to the curator of the exhibit, Marvette Pérez, hip-hop began as a way to draw attention to social conditions, like poverty in the inner city. It is an amazingly creative art form that is continually transforming itself. “This music speaks to people across the world as it is easily adapted to the music and language of other countries.”

Reaching Out to the Hip-Hop Community

In preparation for “Hip-Hop Won’t Stop,” the Museum collected objects from all aspects of hip-hop arts and culture—music, technology, sports, graffiti, fashion, break dancing, and language. This includes vinyl records, handwritten lyrics, boom boxes, clothing and costumes, videos and interviews, disc jockey equipment and microphones, and posters and photos.

Over the next several years, the museum plans to reach out to the hip-hop community across the nation to gather additional objects and oral histories—stories of rappers and dancers that will be recorded and saved. During a special ceremony in New York, hip-hop pioneers Russell Simmons, Grandmaster Flash, Afrika Bambaataa, Kool Herc, Ice T, Fab 5 Freddy, and Crazy Legs participated in an event announcing the Museum’s plans to build a large collection of hip-hop artifacts. Several of these hip-hop greats, including MC Lyte, were the first to donate objects to “Hip-Hop Won’t Stop.” A committee made up of artists, producers, and others—the true experts on hip-hop culture—has helped the museum create the exhibit. The long-range vision for “Hip-Hop Won’t Stop” includes a large exhibition for millions of museum visitors and a companion traveling display. Check out the Museum’s website for more information.

<http://americanhistory.si.edu/>

